

INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION  
1313 EAST 60TH STREET - CHICAGO 37, ILLINOIS

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## SUMMARY OF REPLIES TO RECENT SELECTED MIS INQUIRIES

How many and what kind of inquiries does MIS receive from the officials of subscribing cities, and what replies have been furnished by MIS on some of the subjects of general interest?

One of the most important features of MIS, since it was established five and one-half years ago, is the prompt handling of inquiries received by mail, wire, or telephone from officials of subscribing cities. During the first six months of 1951, for example, MIS received 314 inquiries on 52 different municipal topics.

Replies to MIS inquiries generally summarize best practice, indicate trends, and often contain specific suggestions. In addition, books, pamphlets, and other published material often are loaned to the inquiring official from the extensive files accumulated by the International City Managers' Association.

Many of the inquiries are of general interest to city officials. In order to give all MIS subscribers the benefit of information on a wider range of subjects, this report presents brief extracts from some of the replies given to selected questions received during the first six months of 1951. Subjects covered in this report are:

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### Charters and Codes

In preparing or revising city charters two National Municipal League publications are indispensable. One is the "Model City Charter" which covers major points of governmental organizations, elections, finance, personnel, and so forth. The "Guide for Charter Commissions" outlines the practical step-by-step process of setting up a citizen commission, considering various proposals, consulting expert groups, writing the charter, holding public hearings, and placing the issue on the ballot.

In addition many cities are preparing or revising administrative codes, sometimes as part of the general ordinance code. Some of the best codes have been prepared by Cincinnati, Ohio; Saginaw; Michigan; Concord; New Hampshire; and Palo Alto, California.

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### City Council Meeting Time

A number of the larger council-manager cities have changed the regular city council meeting time from night to daytime sessions. Both the members of the city council and the city managers of these cities generally prefer daytime meetings. The governing bodies in smaller cities, however, tend to hold evening sessions, especially in cities of less than 10,000 population.

A few months ago a city of 20,000 population put the council-manager plan into effect and one of the first decisions of the city council was to change its meetings to early afternoon. Under the previous mayor-council plan the meetings had been held in the evening. After the change was made there was outspoken opposition by labor groups to the effect that holding daytime meetings would make it impossible for the working man to attend city council meetings. The worker would have to take a half day off without pay if he wanted to attend. The change-over from evening to daytime sessions gave opponents of the manager plan a basis for charging that the manager plan gave preferential treatment to those persons who can adjust working hours so as to attend council meetings without losing salary. All of which points up that first consideration has to be given to the convenience of citizens.

### Authority of the City Council

Every year a good number of cities are struggling with the preparation of new charters or the extensive revision and rewriting of obsolete charters. In practice the city charter will be successful to the extent that it successfully maintains a nice distinction between the democratic prerogatives of the city council and the authority and responsibility of the chief executive--mayor or city manager. One inquiry recently posed three difficult problems in the drafting of a city charter.

1. Should the city council have the power to approve monthly claims and payrolls? Here it is advisable to distinguish between policy and administration and relieve the council of the arduous and time consuming detail of approving vouchers of any kind. Control can be maintained more realistically through the council's investigative powers and its appointment of the chief administrator. In addition the charter itself can provide for financial administration including internal and independent audits that will provide necessary safeguards.

2. Should large contracts be awarded by the city council or left with the city manager? Here the answer is not as definite as for question 1. The details of opening and awarding bids do not seem to be necessary council duties when the charter provides clear-cut and definite legal safeguards. The charter should provide of course for clear and specific procedures for bids and awards, always providing that the award shall be made to the "lowest and best bidder." The astute manager will always refer doubtful cases to the council in any event.

3. Should the civil service commission or personnel department be required to certify payrolls? This is a superfluous and time consuming detail for such a board. The experience of a number of state and local governments shows that perfunctory payroll checking by no means prevents fraud. The department head who is responsible for preparation of the payroll for his department should be the one to certify that it is correct. He is responsible for having appropriate appointment, transfer, pay increase, and classification notices properly executed and on hand to support each payroll entry. When department heads are held responsible for certifying, with appropriate penalties for malfeasance, the civil service



commission can do its investigations by making spot checks of records, payrolls, and other personnel records. The civil service commission can be authorized, rather than required, to check payrolls.

### Building Code Revision

Hundreds of American cities have been revising building codes since the close of World War II. Housing shortages and high costs of home construction are forcing even the smallest cities to re-examine codes for simplification and economy. Most cities have used four model building codes as references for code revision, and these model codes are discussed briefly in the 1951 Municipal Year Book. In addition, two particularly useful publications discuss all the factors to be considered in code preparation and revision. These two publications are "Preparation and Revision of Building Codes" by the National Bureau of Standards, and "Administrative Requirements for Building Codes" by the American Standards Association. These publications are important supplements to model codes.

Some cities find it advisable to use consultants to prepare or review building codes. Both the National Board of Fire Underwriters and the Building Officials Conference of America provide consulting service. Limited consulting service also is available from the United States Department of Commerce. The National Bureau of Standards has prepared model building codes in numerous fields of construction including building, fire, plumbing, electrical, masonry, elevator, and industrial safety.

### The City Hall Pigeon Roost

An exasperating problem for city officials is the roosting of pigeons, starlings, and other birds on public buildings. There are three principal methods of discouraging the birds. (1) Installation of a high frequency electric-generated whistle in the vicinity of the roosting area. The high frequency whistle although inaudible to human beings will disturb and drive off the birds. (2) Placing dummy owls made of pressed sheet metal in the roosting area. The owl is a predator of birds and its image sometimes discourages their resting in close proximity. (3) The use of wires charged with low-voltage electricity along the resting edges.

None of these methods is permanently successful. Some cities have used a commercial concern to eliminate starlings by the use of gas. In Hartford, Connecticut, the city has successfully trapped pigeons on the city hall. Traps were set on the state capitol roof in St. Paul, Minnesota, and 180 birds were captured in the first two weeks. Extermination is the only cure but usually meets strong opposition from humane societies and other animal protection groups. Several pamphlets on the control of pigeons, starlings, and other objectionable birds are obtainable from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

### Leasing the City Hall

Faced with tax and debt limits and limited revenue sources, a few cities are desperately seeking other means of financing city halls and other public buildings. Several interesting devices have been used but not for municipal buildings. Four state governments--Florida, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Michigan--have created special authorities to negotiate "lend-lease-own" agreements for the construction of state office buildings. These authorities issue revenue bonds for the construction, they own the buildings, and they lease them to the state government with the rents comprising the means of paying off the bonds. Michigan and Pennsylvania

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have passed enabling acts that allow political subdivisions to create special authorities for issuing revenue bonds to finance public buildings with the bonds to be paid off by rentals.

Insurance companies have been very active in this field in the last five years by constructing factories and retail stores which are leased to business firms. Some chain store retail outlets, for example, have been built and are owned by insurance companies but leased to the chain store companies. This has been mutually advantageous because the chain store avoids tying up its capital for long periods of time while the insurance company, on the other hand, has an outlet for investment that brings better return than government bonds.

#### A Department of Public Safety

Some thought has been given in larger cities to establishing a department of public safety which would include police and fire departments and perhaps the safety functions of building inspection, elevator inspection, fire, plumbing and electrical codes, and so forth. A reshuffling of this kind does not get to the heart of well-balanced organization. It is true that a department of public safety will reduce the number of people reporting to the city manager by one or more, but the manager has to rely on second-hand information (obtained from others) given by the head of a catch-all department. This is not the same thing as the integrated police-fire department described in the May, 1951, issue of Public Management. Here a real attempt has been made at integration, combined duties, and coordinated service. Such organization is entirely different from placing miscellaneous activities under one man and calling it a department.

#### Emergency Ambulance Service

A small midwest city asked for advice on providing municipal emergency ambulance service. It is doubtful that such service should be provided if the job can be done on a contract basis by undertakers or by other private ambulance services. The first cost of an ambulance is high and personnel must be kept on duty at all times to respond to calls. In a few cities an ambulance has been given to the city government by a wealthy citizen or by some civic organization. It is an expensive gift because the city immediately must place one or more persons on the payroll to be on call for emergency ambulance cases. If private agencies cannot handle the job, one alternative is to equip police patrol cars with limited ambulance facilities. Several cities have adopted this plan including New York and Chicago.

Another perennial problem in cities is whether police or fire departments should have the primary responsibility for emergency calls. The police department has the advantage of radio service and complete patrol car coverage of the city. Fire department employees, on the other hand, may have had special training in rescue work where smoke and poisonous gases are present and can use special equipment including torches, gas masks, and the like.

#### Collecting from Parking Meters

Once parking meters are installed the city has the problem of making collections and accounting for money deposited in the meters without loss or theft. If controls are too rigid they become time consuming and expensive. Two cities have worked out simple and economical collection methods.



In Flint, Michigan, the city treasurer maintains a card record system by parking meter locations. The parking meter heads are locked and contain sealed coin boxes. When the city employee collects the coin boxes he replaces them with empty sealed boxes. The sealed boxes which the collector removes from the parking meter heads are brought to the city treasurer's office where another employee opens the boxes and counts the coins. The amount collected is recorded on the individual parking meter cards. Thus the sealed coin boxes are not opened by the same employee who does the collecting, and the city has a record by parking meter locations of the revenue from each meter. The individual cards for parking meters are checked periodically, and any deviation from the average revenue per meter is investigated.

Sealed containers are used in making collections from meters in Enid, Oklahoma. The containers are taken directly to a bank where they are opened by bank employees, and the cash is counted and deposited to the city's account. The bank is paid about 1.2 per cent of meter collections for this service.

### Cost-of-Living Pay Plans

With an almost continuous rise in prices over the last ten years, city employees are constantly putting on pressure for salary increases and often ask for a cost-of-living pay plan tied in with the consumers' price index of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. There is still some controversy over the wisdom of cost-of-living pay plans. Many economists feel strongly that they contribute to inflation or deflation in the national economy, particularly the plans in effect in large industrial concerns such as the General Motors Corporation. On the other hand, employees always express strong opposition to the automatic reduction feature of a pay plan when prices are declining. The practical consideration is whether city revenues will expand at the same rate with increases in the consumers' price index.

Several of the variations in cost-of-living pay plans are described in MIS Report No. 45. One of the most realistic plans is one adopted early this year by Farmington, Connecticut. It contains a clear statement of policy on raising the salaries of administrative employees at the same rate as other employees in order to avoid "telescoping" the pay plan. Almost all other cost-of-living pay plans apply only to the first \$2,500 or \$3,000 of salary. Any cost-of-living device is not a substitute for a pay plan that is based upon representative salaries in public and private employment and a sound position classification plan (see MIS Report No. 69).

### Control of Private Police

Officials of a southern city were approached recently by persons who wanted to establish a private police patrol service. The agency planned to solicit commercial and residential clients and draw up contracts that would provide varying degrees of service including interior check of premises. The service would be rendered on a monthly fee basis. The city quite naturally asked what controls should be exercised over such agencies to protect the interests of citizens.

The MIS reply stated that the city should definitely discourage or even prohibit any private police patrol firm from soliciting clients. There may be good reasons for permitting a private firm to supply a police patrol service inside industrial plants entirely on private property but no such service should be permitted on streets, sidewalks, or other public property or in any residential areas.



Such agencies may be a polite form of extortion. Some years ago for example a private police agency was established in some areas of one of the larger cities to provide service in residential areas at the rate of \$2 per month for single-family dwellings. The private agency put so much pressure upon the people living in those areas that the residents felt they had to join the service.

Certain standards can be established by ordinance for controlling private police. A high license fee should be set, the firm should be required to report immediately any changes in personnel, employment and personal standards should be set up, the activity should be restricted to private property, and the organization should not be allowed to operate in residential areas. Ordinances with these provisions for private police service have been adopted recently by Detroit and Tacoma.

#### How Wide Should a Street Be?

The desirable width of a street depends primarily on traffic volume but also on the number of lanes for moving traffic, whether or not there are street cars and buses, the extent of trucking and other commercial traffic, and the amount of traffic that is through traffic on an inter-city highway. Traffic volume is usually the most important factor and can only be determined by traffic counts and origin and destination surveys. Even these studies have only limited value unless the city has a continuous planning program including a street and traffic plan. If the city knows about what is needed, then technical assistance can be obtained from traffic engineers, state highway departments, and the United States Bureau of Public Roads.

#### Refuse Collection and Disposal

Eighteen inquiries have been received since the first of the year on refuse collection and disposal. Most have asked about service charges and comparative costs. Some cities in adopting or revising ordinances on refuse collection and disposal have asked about the advisability of a refuse collection charge. Any city should consider seriously making refuse collection and disposal a budgetary rather than special charge item. Special charges have a high nuisance value, and the only really good reason for using them is that of legally exceeding statutory or charter tax rate limitations. If a special charge is adopted the people should be fully informed in advance of the reasons.

The cost of refuse collection and the service charge, if any, depend principally on the amount of service the city provides. Refuse service can extend all the way from collecting only garbage to collecting all kinds of refuse from the back doors of homes and providing fresh steam-cleaned cans each week. Collection cost involves equipment, service, manpower, work hours, and length of haul. The cost of refuse disposal depends upon facilities available. If inexpensive land is available near the city, the sanitary landfill method is the best and most economical (see MIS Report No. 24).

Garbage grinders apparently are only a small part of the answer on refuse collection and disposal. A recent study by the American Public Works Association shows that residential garbage grinders eliminate only about 10 per cent of the volume of refuse that must be collected and disposed of in cities. The city council must decide whether garbage grinders are to be allowed or prohibited, and the decision should be based on the present and future capacity of the sewage treatment plant and the financial ability of the city to enlarge the plant.